

Theatre of Images: Record of a Process

Brian C. Russo

In the summer of 2008, I traveled to Universidad Javeriana, Cali, Colombia, to take part in the E.F.E. (*Español Funcional para Extranjeros*) program. This is a Spanish language course offered as part of The Twinning Agreement, a faculty exchange arrangement between Gonzaga and Seattle Universities in the US, and Universidad Javeriana in Colombia. US faculty travel to Javeriana, study Spanish for six weeks, and are asked to initiate a project with faculty counterparts from Javeriana. Projects reflect the interest of faculty and have ranged from water treatment to ministry or, in my case, theatre.

I was paired with Juan Palencia (English) and John Alex Castillo (Media) who both assisted me in carrying out my project, which was to locate a group of actors, theatre enthusiasts, and acting students, and hold a workshop on basic acting technique. I hoped that from this workshop, the group might develop a performance that could be presented to an audience from Javeriana and the surrounding community. As my time was short, my expectations were modest. Happily, seven participants committed to the work, and we presented a short, original folk play, *La maldición de Doña Luz*, based on a story about a witch, a magical bird, and a proud boy that one of our group brought in.

An audience attended and enjoyed the performance; the actors too were satisfied with the experience. Ultimately, the project was considered a success. I hoped that if I ever had the opportunity to return, I could work on a piece of more depth, hopefully with more experienced actors.

I had just that opportunity in the summer of 2010. Gonzaga University, being a Catholic and Jesuit institution, concerns itself with social justice issues and service learning. So when, at a planning session for Colombia, a colleague spoke of his work on forgiveness and reconciliation, I was inter-

ested—perhaps this could be the focus of my theatre work. He encouraged me, citing the example of South Africa, where theatre has served as a vehicle to explore this theme. I emailed my counterpart, John Alex Castillo, told him of my proposed theme (forgiveness and reconciliation), and I was happy to hear that he wanted to work on this project; fortunately, he would be free of artistic commitments during the weeks of my stay.

My fantasy of the project went something like this: actors would gather stories from Colombia's recent troubled past and we would dramatize them. The reality turned out differently. When I met with John Alex in Colombia, we decided that we did want to work with stories of forgiveness and reconciliation, perhaps in a form of documentary theatre. Also, members of the experimental troupe *Altergesto* (Other Gesture) he founded over ten years ago would also be available. This was great news because it fulfilled my hope of working with experienced artists, as opposed to newcomers; new actor resistance and self-consciousness would not be a barrier.

We also decided that we wished to involve the audience, making them true participants in the work. John Alex suggested that to aid audience participation, we present in a non-traditional or "found space." This all sounded great, but there was a tension in our process before we even began: how to present stories while also actively involving the audience in a non-traditional space? Stories suggest plot and character, the stuff of traditional acting and directing, which also implies the traditional role of the audience as passive spectators, consumers of stories. This style of presentation would not produce the outcome we sought in terms of our audience or space. We would work through this contradiction in the first weeks of our meetings.

By the end of the first week and a half, we had gathered material of two forms:

1. Five stories around ideas of forgiveness and reconciliation brought back by our actors.
2. Three extended improvisations around our theme:
 - a. negative space explorations,
 - b. finding gestures to express forgiveness and reconciliation,
 - c. repetition exercises around our theme.

The gathering of stories and improvisations were attempts to try and find a language to express what forgiveness and reconciliation might look like, might feel like. I came to understand that what interested me most was the resistance to saying "I'm sorry," and the resistance to saying, "I forgive you." Somehow, I wanted that to be our focus—what it took, the cost of authentically meaning

those words. Several nights I returned to my room and rather feverishly wrote scenes and scenarios based on the improvs and stories, but this was not the shape the piece would come to have. I was frankly overwhelmed with the material we already had—five stories, five scenes, dialogue, characters I was trying to extrapolate in English—the five scenes would have to be translated, somehow put together, rehearsed. I brought all this work and these concerns to our last meeting of the second week.

John Alex suggested problems with my approach. First, simple logistics would not allow us the time to write and rehearse all the scenes; but more importantly, the audience-actor relationship would remain the traditional one—the actors would play characters in a story that the audience would watch. Why don't we look at our stories, John Alex suggested, for images. This might be a path. And so we searched, doing simple literary analysis that could be translated into actions that our actors could initiate, but then invite the audience into. With a bit of regret at losing the "playwriting approach," but with much relief, I agreed, and we all embarked on this search for images. After much discussion, we settled on the following images.

- a. walking in another's shoes,
- b. looking at one's own reflection before passing judgment on others,
- c. being blindfolded,
- d. inability to let go of emotional baggage,
- e. the bridge.

Planning

John Alex suggested that we use a train trip as the shaping device of our presentation; each "station" would be a different location in our found space. In these locations we could present an individual improvisation based on the particular image and invite the audience into each one. I thought that each station should have an evocative name and a very brief statement about it. I created names for each of the stations—the group helped refine them into Spanish. Once we had the station names, then we created the appropriate statement.

In effect, we were writing the "text" of the work. I proposed and the group accepted the following title—*The Price* [apologies to Arthur Miller]: *A Theatrical Exploration Around The Theme Of Forgiveness And Reconciliation*. (*El Precio: Una Exploración Teatral Sobre El Tema Del Perdón Y La Reconciliación*.)

The Space

After looking at one house under construction, we looked at *El Centro Bienestar*—the university's Health Center. Although the construction site had an obvious feel of raw space, open to interpretation, the Health Center turned out to be preferable. It had an impersonal, fairly claustrophobic (50-seat) waiting area, several large rooms that could be easily cleared and re-envisioned, narrow passageways, and three gardens/courtyards of varying sizes that were natural stages. It was wonderfully serendipitous how the space helped us create the structure of the piece, which was as follows:

1. Introduction in the "Waiting Room."
2. Guide the audience through a series of narrow hallways to the first starkly lit room—"Reflections Alley."
3. Take the audience next door into another large room, but this one dark, except for many votive candles spread all over the floor—"Plaza of the Other's Footsteps."
4. Proceed down a long hallway, opening out into a garden/courtyard—"The Grand Tunnel."
5. Move the group back up the hallway, back to the "plaza," and out the large glass doors, opening out into a large garden/courtyard—"Suitcase Avenue."
6. Back into the plaza, back through hallways to third garden/courtyard (which faces "Waiting Room")—"Bridge of Belief."
7. The group walks through garden/courtyard back to seats of waiting room for post-show discussion.

The Health Center satisfied our need for found space and audience involvement; in a couple of hours we were able to re-envision and prepare seven "sets" that might have taken huge amounts of time to build in a traditional theatre.

Performance and Text

As the audience of faculty, staff and students gathered, the feel was that of a usual seated audience, looking over the programs, a bit curious about the strange space, but quickly settling into the audience member's typical passive, vicarious attitude.

I addressed the group in Spanish, then English. "Tonight members of the Theatre Group, *Altergesto* (Other Gesture), John Alex Castillo, and myself present *The Price: A Theatrical Exploration Around The Theme Of Forgiveness And Reconciliation*. This will not be a play with characters and a story; rather, it is a series of actions in which you will be asked to participate. After

the performance we will have a short discussion to which you are all invited.”
(*Loud sounds of a busy train station.*)

ANNOUNCER: Welcome to the Human Condition Line. Next Stop, Reflections Alley. (*Repeated twice in Spanish and English, as were all subsequent announcements and statements. The three actors lead the audience out of the waiting room through several corridors, which open out to a starkly lit 20 x 20 space, the first station. Meanwhile, train sounds till the audience has gathered. Once everyone is in the space:*)

ANNOUNCER: 1st Stop, Reflections Alley.

MARIE ALEJANDRA: Sometimes, we can see a lot of the other in our own reflections.

Improvisation: All three actors “discover” everyday objects, like a book, a coffee cup, a purse, that have mirrors (colored or cracked) glued into them. They surreptitiously study their reflection, then glance at the other actors. With great trepidation, they hand the mirror/object to each other, playing that when they look in the mirror, they’re seeing something of the other in their own reflection. After a few exchanges happen with the actors, the actors now pass the object/mirrors to the audience.



Participants take in their images in “Reflections Alley.”¹

Commentary: The audience seemed curious/apprehensive about their uncertain (found?) roles, where they were being led, and what they might be asked to do. All moved willingly, but many, judging by facial and body expressions, seemed resistant to take part. When passed the mirrored objects, they mainly checked the item and their reflection, and passed it on.

I also believed the actors were not so clear on this improv. I would have liked to have seen more discovery upon their own looking in small mirrors, more trepidation about what they were handing to others when they gave their mirrors, their own self-criticizing reflections, to others. The audience, I soon discovered, would treat each invitation with the gravity or seriousness with which it was offered.

(Sound of train leaving.)

ANNOUNCER: Next stop, Plaza of the Other's Footsteps. *(Train sounds. Actors lead audience to an adjoining room, which is dark, except for many votive candles, spread all over the floor. When audience is gathered, train sounds out.)*

ANNOUNCER: This is the Plaza of the Other's Footsteps.

PAOLA: Sometimes, we need to walk in another's shoes.

Improvisation: The actors deliberately remove their shoes, and with some resistance, offer their shoes to each other. They try on each other's shoes and move around in the space. They now do the same with the participants. Soon all are walking around in other shoes.

Commentary: Despite the seriousness of the actors in offering their shoes, this invitation was met by the audience with child-like play. As opposed to the previous improv, this one caused lots of laughter and conversation—lots of pointing at ill-fitting shoes and resultant awkward movements. The audience, by now, was “getting” its role, and they seemed to enjoy how active they were being asked to be. As far as them having any thoughts, insights, or recognition about forgiveness and reconciliation, I would be skeptical, but I think this “station” inadvertently relaxed the audience, and made them receptive as to what was to follow.

(Train sounds, as participants find their shoes and continue on.)

ANNOUNCER: Next stop, The Grand Tunnel. *(Actors lead participants down a very narrow hallway, which opens out into a square, open-air garden. Hanging from the tree branches is a random collection of knotted men's ties. The actors step into the garden. The participants gather around the very low wall that surrounds it.)*

ANNOUNCER: This stop, The Grand Tunnel.

WILMER: How can we remove our blindfolds that we can't even see?

Improvisation: Each of the actors puts on a necktie to show "standard life." PAOLA initiates a negative space exercise (in which the first actor creates a shape and the others try to fill the negative space around them), which the other two join. WILMER decides to use the necktie as a blindfold—he smiles broadly as he puts it over his eyes, deciding that he likes his blindfold very much. He clumsily tries to continue exercise, then invites PAOLA and MARIE ALEJANDRA to join him in blindfolding themselves. They all move happily, albeit clumsily. Then each actor takes off his "blindfold," finds a participant, puts the tie on, moves with them, then uses the tie as a blindfold. Soon the garden is filled with struggling blindfolded participants.

Commentary: Audience members seemed intrigued by this station. Their attention, rather than on their own self-consciousness now seemed to be much more fully on the action and how they could participate or observe. Some seemed to like to demonstrate how much they could move, even blindfolded. Others struggled and were hesitant to move with their sight taken away in an unfamiliar space. Still others observed and, overall, it was a striking theatrical image: unused ties, knotted and hanging from trees in the warmly-lit garden, where a group of twenty or so people moved among trees and each other with greater or lesser facility, blindfolded. The mood of the group intensified, and self-consciousness was fading.

ANNOUNCER: Next stop, Suitcase Avenue. *(Participants return blindfold-neckties to actors, who then lead audience members through a hallway and out into a second, much larger yard. In the yard are two sets of luggage, garment bags, umbrellas, and other traveling gear. The luggage is set in two piles at opposite sides of the garden. Affixed to the various pieces are extremely large labels, which state: "Dudas" ("Doubts"), "Rabia" ("Rage"), "Orgullo" ("Pride"), "Venganza" ("Revenge"). Train sounds cease.)*

ANNOUNCER: This stop, Suitcase Avenue.

MARIE ALEJANDRA: When can we get rid of our precious baggage that we love so much?

Improvisation: WILMER and PAOLA confront each other in silence. They decide, after much resistance, to come together, but they need their bags. They run to get them. As they come to their luggage, they are happy. WILMER pats his suitcase, PAOLA strokes her bag. They try to gather their stuff and move, but they are impossibly encumbered. MARIE ALEJANDRA tries to help, but neither WILMER nor PAOLA are willing to let go; fiercely, they hang on. MARIE ALEJANDRA turns to the participants for help. Slowly, silently,



Participants struggle with Wilmer and Paola who refuse to give up their “baggage.”

the participants convince the two to give up their luggage. Unencumbered at last, the two face each other and embrace. Train sounds.

Commentary: During this part of the performance, elements fused. The actors had created strong internal given circumstances that filled their “reconciliation” with inner conflict and drama. They both deeply emotionally invested in their “baggage” and thus could not come back together. The mediating actor truly could not bring them together and the audience was invested in helping the actors let go and come together. Enlisted audience members whispered in the actors’ ears as others gently or more forcefully helped actors let go of the baggage. When the two actors came together, unencumbered, it was a result that came about because of the actors’ and audience’s joint wills.

ANNOUNCER: Next and last, stop, Bridge of Belief. (*Train sounds. Actors lead participants back to waiting room area, which faces onto a third garden. At opposite ends of the garden are two chairs. When the participants gather, PAOLA and MARIE ALEJANDRA stand on the chairs, opposite each other.*)

ANNOUNCER: This is the last stop, Bridge of Belief.

WILMER: Sometimes, we need help to reach each other.

Improvisation: MARIE ALEJANDRA and PAOLA, on opposite sides of the garden, look at each other with the desire to connect, but there is no way they can cross the space. On the ground at PAOLA’s feet is a wooden stretcher, about as long and wide as a surfboard. WILMER picks it up and extends in front of PAOLA in the air. PAOLA tries it, but in the air it can’t support her

weight with only WILMER's support, and it is not nearly long enough. He takes the board, runs across the garden, and tries with MARIE ALEJENDRA, but the result is the same. So, WILMER turns to the participants, five in all, who can support the weight and carry the board. WILMER arranges this, and runs to the other end, where there is another stretcher board. He finds five more participants who can carry MARIE ALEJANDRA. Now with both boards supported, the participants carry MARIE ALEJANDRA and PAOLA toward each other. They meet in the middle, touch, and step on each other's boards. The participants carry them to their destinations.

Commentary: By now, the audience was fully participating. Different members eagerly came forward to build the "bridge." Very few words were exchanged, but there was plenty of eye contact and head nods to acknowledge the women's weight could be borne. It was a poetic moment as the bearers brought the women together, the actors tested their boards, and exchanged places. When the boards were carried with the women to new and opposite sides, again the sense was that ALL had completed the action. During the curtain call, not only actors, but audience members who had taken part, bowed.



Participants support Paola and Alejandra who meet on "The Bridge of Belief."

ANNOUNCER: Thank you for traveling with us. We hope you had a pleasant journey, and we look forward to seeing you again.²

Post-show discussion and final thoughts

The body language of the audience communicated their engagement and investment. People leaned forward, listened intently to each other's comments. The discussion was at times spirited (participants found themselves associating to their lives), at times philosophical (as a Jesuit institution, this work was relevant), at times technical (why not do this scene another way?), and at times, funny (many smelly shoes/feet). Much discussion centered on the "how" of the experience—how wonderful, unusual it felt to participate, to move from place to place, how novel and somehow meaningful the experience was.

Less response came on the "what." What was this piece about? What did it mean to ask for pardon? What did it mean to forgive? The questions that would inform the next work are: yes, it is possible, and even desirable to deeply engage the audience, but is it also possible to have them reflect on issues, while they are engaged? To have them involved in both the how and the what. This is Brecht's question, albeit in a different context: when the audience becomes the actor, do they become so involved that they lose the ability to reflect? How to alienate an audience, while asking them to be deeply involved?

Later, I sent out a short set of questions to audience members. A selection of the responses follow under each question:

1. *What impressions of El Precio do you retain?*

- I was impressed with how "small" of a cast it was, yet how "big" of a production it was. I loved going on this journey with them as they led us through the various rooms. Although I was nervous at first about the audience's active participation, I liked how much the audience was able to be involved, and how necessary it was for a deeper understanding of what it was all about.
- I remember it as the best audience participation theatre I'd experienced. Reconciliation and the difficulty of changing ideas, perspectives, habits to meet others on common ground.
- I felt it was a play communicating the clear message advocating being more courageous and intentional about reaching out to those around us to do what's right.

- As I recall there were five acts/scenes—travelers in the station, human reflections in the mirror, ties that bind, burden of baggage, and building bridges, in which we are all actors on the stage of life. The drama of life=how we are related to one another, if we are. No guarantees, but the promise. How the play turns out depends upon how we play our roles. We will get free of self, shyness, fear of exposure, performance anxiety to play our roles freely. Social pressure to play the role I resent and relish in the same breath, otherwise I would live and die in the isolation of my own bondage.
2. *How was this different or not from plays you have seen?*
 - I've never seen a production where you moved through the different sets. I've never seen a production that utilized a school building in the way you did. The bilingual exchange and actors interacting with audience was new for me, as well.
 - The play was interactive at a much more intimate level. The level risks felt elevated in an invigorating way.
 - The interaction with the audience seemed more natural and with a range of effects from gut-wrenching (letting go of baggage) to humorous (shoes).
 - Main difference—not a spectator, but drawn into the drama. Theatre always has the capacity to do that, though it may let us remain in our seats at a distance from the stage. So, we are drawn in differently to traditional drama and this piece, whatever it is called.
 3. *We worked on preparing the “how” of the piece (in other words, how you could participate). What about the “what” of the piece? It was intended to be a presentation on forgiveness/reconciliation. Do you recall if the intended subject played into your reaction?*
 - There were definitely doses of forgiveness and reconciliation in the play, but the overriding theme I interpreted was one of putting love into action.
 - Yes, I mentioned “reconciliation” above before reading this question, so the principal subject stayed with me.
 - I see that, but in my experience think I experienced the piece more of being drawn out of isolation of oneself in the crowd into the living, breathing drama of life in the mix of things.
 4. *Do you recall any associations/memories that came to you while you were seeing the piece?*

- Memories that I have include moments in which I had been reluctant to forgive or be open to reconciliation, especially in the blindfold scene. You really do find yourself walking around aimlessly and helpless when you can't forgive or accept forgiveness.
- The last scene reminded me of a significant relationship in my life where the grace to attain was to see the world in the other person's shoes; that takes work, and many times, a community laboring toward the same thing.
- The mix of interior and exterior, especially in the interior garden, gave me a sense of mysterious, primeval dynamics at play—perhaps original sin and freedom, perhaps the murky complexity of the unconscious or even the collective conscious of the whole culture.
- Interesting question. I do not recall making connections at the time, though I might have.

What I gained from this work was a new way of approaching time-less issues—the use of image extraction from stories as a method for creating audience-engaged theatre pieces in found spaces. The themes for utilizing this method are infinite.

I was pleased by audience response, particularly that judging from their responses they “got” how difficult the price of forgiveness could be, how active the process is, and how helpless one feels when unable to forgive.

Gonzaga University

Notes

¹ All photos by author. Actors: Paola Andrea Drada, Wilmer Camacho, and Marie Alejandra Mosquera.

² You can view *El Precio* by going to YouTube, and typing in “El Precio/Russo.”